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LOCAL NEWS

Dogs unleash children's love of reading at Abilene library



Thomas Metthe/Reporter-News Levi Lafuente, 2, and his mother, Lyana, read a book as Danni, a certified therapy dog, and Levi's friend Sophia Cobarruvias, 5, listen during a Tail-Waggin' Tutors event Wednesday at the downtown Abilene Public Library.

By Scott Kirk, Special to the Reporter-News

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Finley, a 100-pound Great Pyrenees, may not have been the most attentive listener as children read to him Wednesday at the downtown Abilene Public Library, but the 3-year-old therapy dog clearly was luxuriating in the attention.

Finley, owned by Rosanna Day, was one of four therapy dogs at the library, including Layla, a 6-year-old chocolate lab owned by Mattia Bray, and boxers Roscoe and Danni, owned by Barbara O'Brien.

Roscoe and Danni, brother and sister, were the veterans of the group, having been therapy dogs since they were a year old. They will soon be 8. Layla and Finley are in their first year of duty — in fact, Wednesday marked Finley's first gig.

The dogs are part of Therapy Dogs International's Tail-Waggin' Tutors program.

Bray said the program helps children who have difficulty reading in public settings, such as classrooms.

"It lets them read to an unbiased, nonjudgmental audience," she said. "It helps not to have someone who tells them they didn't say a word right."

Bray got Layla after her son moved from Abilene and was unable to take the dog with him. Bray decided a couple of years ago to train Layla as a therapy dog because she appeared to have the prerequisite temperament for the job. Layla and Finley were classmates in the Canine Good Citizen course.

"They're buds," Bray said. "It's hard keeping them from playing right now. They'll get to play together when this is over."

Layla works with Alzheimer's patients, while Finley will be working at Abilene Regional Medical Center.

The dogs were unfailingly well-behaved, although they didn't always appear to paying attention to the reading of such selections as "Bye-Bye, Big Bad Bullybug."

Finley, for example, appeared to be more interested in having 9-year-old Conner Krake, a third-grader in the Wylie Independent School District, scratch his stomach than in being read to.

Tryphena Douglas, a 7-year-old first-grader at Dyess Elementary, noticed, however, that Layla didn't walk away from her while she read — the way her own dog sometimes does.

Children's librarian Kelsie Wade said the dogs have been used at other branches of the library, adding that although she had marketed the event as a tool to help children who have trouble reading, most of the 16 children in attendance during the first half of the hourlong event were good readers.

Wade said she had no problem getting permission to have the dogs in the library.

"Everyone was pretty cool with it," she said. "They said, 'Just keep them in the room.'"

Wade said the dogs will return, probably on a quarterly basis. She didn't expect them to be permanent fixtures at the library, however.

"I think it would be awesome," she said. "But they might be a distraction for some people."

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